

Here's how unconscious bias can affect your company's performance reviews

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As we head into the second half of the year, many managers and employees around the world are probably still licking their wounds after undergoing the biannual trauma of performance reviews. Universally reviled by those on both sides of the table, the standard employee review process has definitely come under fire over the past few years for being an ineffective tool to evaluate an employee's achievements and challenges.



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Many companies are choosing what they deem to be more effective methods, such as continuous performance management, where short-term goals are set and feedback is far more frequent. There are even apps available – such as Impraise, Reflektive and 15Five – that can assist in the review process to make it more intuitive and easier to complete.

The burden of bias

Yet very few of these performance evaluation methods address a key obstacle that managers have no control over: bias. This isn't the kind of bias that we are familiar with, such as prejudices based on race, sex, or even age, although they do stem from them. Rather, these are biases that we all have, regardless of how open-minded we think we are.

Neuroscience tells us that our brains are actually hardwired to be biased – a result of mental shortcuts our brain takes, so it can avoid being overwhelmed. These shortcuts help us make decisions that avoid danger, help us go faster, and feel good. For example, if we are hijacked at a particular intersection, then our experience bias will lead us to make an unconscious decision to avoid that area. This experience bias proves useful here as it protects us. But this bias can also serve us negatively; for instance, if someone performs poorly at work, our experience bias will cause us to think that this person will most likely not perform in the future, even if it only happened once.

Importantly, biases are completely unconscious, so we do not experience ourselves being biased. It is this unconscious bias that can lead us to inaccurately assess someone's performance, purely because we are unaware of the mental shortcuts our brain is taking to reach that skewed opinion. More importantly this unconscious bias is similar to a natural biological function, such as our pancreas regulating our insulin levels. In the same way that we cannot regulate our pancreas by just being aware of its functioning, we cannot reduce bias by just being aware of this bias. That is why it is

important to first accept that we all have biases, secondly to develop a language to label and talk about these biases, and finally to address them through following a set process.

The SEEDS Model®

A lot of unconscious bias training in workplace settings focuses on generating awareness of bias, or to 'catch yourself in the act' of being biased. But this is not sufficient to effect any real change and is the reason that, empirically, unconscious bias training has not generated unbiased behaviour. Dr David Rock, founder of the NeuroLeadership Institute, developed a model to address bias that includes processes rather than simply awareness. This strategy, known as The SEEDS Model®, identifies processes that can redirect the five broad categories of bias, along with ways of mitigating them. Here are examples of the three most common biases in performance reviews, and how to address them:

1. Similarity bias

"People similar to me are better than others"

As human beings, we have a natural and instinctual need to belong and feel part of a group. As a result, we intuitively prefer people similar to us, and undervalue those who we see as not being in our group. The challenge is that we sometimes use superficial markers such as skin colour or gender to decide who's "one of us" and who's not.

Example: If you are a male manager, you are unconsciously more likely to favour other male colleagues, while female employees often have to work harder to get noticed by you. Similarly, if you are devoutly religious, you would tend to give more attention to employees who are of the same faith than to employees who are agnostic or atheist.

How to counter it: When starting a conversation, find common ground with everyone you assess so that you see each individual as being part of a group you also belong to. This will ensure your employees are all on equal footing at the start of the performance review process. They can bring their best selves to the process and you can make an accurate assessment.

2. Expedience bias

"It's obvious, so it must be true"

It is estimated that we make around 35,000 decisions a day. Luckily, our brain takes mental shortcuts to help us reach most of these decisions quickly and efficiently. The downside is that, in making these hasty decisions, we often neglect to consider details that may be more relevant or useful, rather than just the information that comes to mind first. Since the information that is the easiest to access is the information that feels relevant, we often focus on this and ignore other valuable information.

Example: When assessing someone's performance, you focus on the most obvious signs of success or failure, such as revenue targets not reached, or numbers not attained.

How to counter it: Try and paint a complete picture of each employee by looking for achievements that are not immediately apparent, such as their ability to work well with other team members and help them perform at their best. You could also include the quality of client relationships in sales assessment and not only revenue. Ask for the perspectives of other people who work with the person being evaluated to gather more information. Avoid rushing the review process and making hasty conclusions.

3. Distance bias

"What's nearer is better than what's far"

Our brain likes to categorise things. And, because of the proximity network of our brain, we automatically tend to prefer what is closer to us, whether it be in terms of distance or time.

Example: You are most likely to remember an employee's most recent actions, achievements, and shortcomings. In a June performance review, the accomplishments and challenges of January, February and March pale in significance to those of April, May and June. This is because it is easier to remember what happened recently than what happened a while ago. Further, we tend to favour people who we see more often in the office than those that we don't. This bias is becoming far more common in the new flexible-time work economy.

How to counter it: Regularly record details of the employee's performance each month, so you get a full, six-month picture when you need to assess their performance. Make sure that you use the same evaluation metrics for individuals who are in your office and those who are in remote locations.

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